



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Le Boucher (The Butcher) by Claude Chabrol; Andre Genoves
Paul Warshow

Film Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Autumn, 1972), pp. 54-58.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?&sici=0015-1386%28197223%2926%3A1%3C54%3ALB%28B%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

LE BOUCHER

(The Butcher) Written and directed by Claude Chabrol. Producer: Andre Genoves. Photography: Jean Rabier. Music: Pierre Jansen.

Here is a French film which, in the tradition of such French classics as *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Casque d'or*, is about the inability of two true lovers to get together. Yet hearing this description, who would imagine anything like *Le Boucher*? That such a film be romantic, tragic and moving is nothing new. But that it be also a disturbing mystery story, a kind of horror story, in which insanity and perversion are central, we do not expect.

Putting the horror elements temporarily to one side (as, in a sense, the film does itself) we have the following story. In one of those provincial French towns where life is static and insulated, Paul the butcher (Jean Yanne) meets Hélène the schoolmistress (Stéphane Audran) and a friendship, a kind of Platonic love, develops. The difference in their backgrounds and social positions would seem to preclude the friendship. But a mutual solitude, and a common sensitivity and intelligence, bring the two of them together until, although they remain somewhat formal with each other, they are the most important people in each other's lives.

Mature, independent, to all appearances entirely in control, yet without a hint of coldness or rigidity, Hélène seems a magnificent woman. We see, even when she does not, that Paul is in love with her. He treats her in a sweet, shy, worshipful way. As they picnic in the woods, Paul diffidently asks her why she has chosen not to have any lovers. She explains that ten years ago she was so badly hurt by a lover's leaving her that she became physically ill for a long time (some sort of breakdown). Now she is happy and does not want to risk another affair. Paul says that not making love can drive you crazy. Hélène answers that making love can also drive you crazy. He asks her what she would do if he kissed her. She says she would do nothing but asks him not to; and he doesn't.

Of Paul's past we know that his father, whom he hated, was also the butcher in the town; that his parents' marriage was bad; and that he spent fifteen years in the army and is haunted by the memories of the carnage he saw. He also has

a puritan side: he shows disgust when Hélène implies that her way of solving the "problem" of her sexual urges is to masturbate.

But there is another part to the story. Someone is going around the town stabbing young women to death, bringing grief to their families and friends and fear to everyone—for the murders appear gratuitous, the murderer remains at large, and the police have absolutely no evidence to go on. Here the film is a mystery story, in which early on we come to suspect that Paul is the murderer, our suspicions are confirmed, then cast into doubt, then finally confirmed absolutely.

Paul, then, is a "madman" who uncontrollably murders young women (the connection of his madness with his war experiences and with his occupation is made quite obvious). His madness, though, is of a particular kind and is presented to us in an analogous way: all his "mad" behavior (except possibly at the end of the film) takes place when he is alone with his victim and all of it takes place off-screen: we never see it. We see him (except for a brief while at the end of the film) only with Hélène—either alone with her or with others as well—and thus we see only the respectable, likable and quite genuine side of his character that he shows society and the woman he loves. Thus his life as a murderer corresponds to the repressed or hidden side of all of us. We all have behavior we conceal from others, things we do only when no one can see us, even if it be only talking to ourselves, throwing something in anger across the room, staring at ourselves in the mirror, or looking at someone in the apartment across the way. For Paul the butcher, this behavior is stabbing young women to death.

Looked at in this way, *Le Boucher* can be seen as a film about personal integration versus fragmentation. Like the voyeur, the exhibitionist, and the rapist, Paul the murderer approaches women in a distorted, partial way rather than as one whole being approaching another. The complement to his murdering of women is his unrealized, imaginary love affair with Hélène, which (in an extraordinarily moving scene) he reveals to her only when he is dying: "I dreamt of you every night, I wanted

REVIEWS

to hold you in my arms and protect you, only with you was I able to forget who I was, I lived only for you." (Quoted from memory.) He has chosen her as the object of his love precisely because she is unattainable.

To prefer the imaginary to the real [Sartre has written in *The Psychology of the Imagination*] is not simply to prefer an imaginary richness, beauty and splendor to a mediocre actuality *despite* the fact that they are unreal. It is also to adopt imaginary feelings and behavior precisely *because* they are imaginary. It is not simply this or that image that one chooses, but the imaginary *state* itself with all it entails, it is not just the features of reality (poverty, frustrated love, failure of one's undertakings, etc.) that one tries to escape, but the form itself of reality, its quality of *presence*, the responsiveness it demands of us. . . . This artificial, congealed, formalized life in slow motion, which for most people is just a makeshift, is exactly what the schizophrenic desires. The morbid dreamer who imagines he is a king would not adjust to a real kingdom, nor even to a tyranny where all his desires would be granted. . . . If the schizophrenic imagines so many amorous scenes, it is not only because his real love has been frustrated, it is even more because he is no longer capable of love.

Paul's love for Hélène is, for him, just such an instance of choosing the imaginary and gives us a more critical perspective on all those idealized fictional loves whose beauty and romantic power come precisely from the fact that they are never, or only fleetingly, allowed to realize themselves. Abortive love affairs, encounters where we and the other are both aware of the possibility of loving each other but where the love is never realized, are among our most common experiences. But part of us persists in thinking of these as our great love affairs when it is surely these which are not.

One way the film progresses is in changing dramatically our attitude toward Paul, first alienating our original liking and sympathy and then replacing it with a new kind of sympathy based on a new knowledge. But another way the film progresses is, more subtly, in casting into doubt and modifying our original attitude toward Hélène. Unlike Paul, she is not hiding from us any fact of her life or element of her personality. What happens instead is that the circumstances of the story and the development of the themes, as they unfold, put what we do know about her in a new light.

At first Hélène appears to us wholly admir-



able. Strong, serene, independent, gracious, loved and admired by the children she teaches and by the people of the town, she seems almost the ideal woman, or rather the ideal human being, for these are qualities which almost all of us aspire to. The one odd or questionable thing about her is that she will not have lovers. Yet the way she explains this, it is perfectly understandable, even commendable, for it is apparently the price she must pay for the happiness she has regained, a happiness which benefits not only herself but everyone around her.

Her "detachment" thus appears of a wholly salutary kind. Indeed in the early stages of her suspicion about Paul, her detachment helps her to protect him: just before the police come to interrogate her about the body she and the children found, we see her in lotus position, meditating. We can assume she meditates regularly, or at least whenever there is a crisis, and in this case it enables her to remain composed and to lie convincingly to the policeman, concealing the evidence that would lay suspicion on Paul.

Yet after Paul's dying confession of his love, our view of her is complicated and modified. Once again after ten years, despite her renunciations, love has entered her life; once again she has been drawn in and changed by a relationship; and once again she is losing the man. But this time, in a sense, she is the betrayer. Suddenly her stance toward the world is put into doubt and we come to see her independence, her sexual renunciation, as a denial of life, a kind of crime against life.

That she might have "saved" Paul, that if she had reciprocated, his fantasy might have

been realized—all this is questionable at best. Nevertheless, in a way far less obvious than Mr. Duffy in Joyce's "A Painful Case," she has "withheld life" from another human being. That she is not dried-up and sterile like Mr. Duffy or like the hero of "The Beast in the Jungle," that she is not a Miss Havisham who has locked herself off from the world and is revenging herself upon it, nor an unconscious lesbian like Olive Chancellor, that she is not anti-life in any such obvious and simple ways, only makes the point stronger—and more universal. She is an admirable and, in general, life-enhancing woman. If she has denied life and love to another to protect herself, then we all do. More even than the pain and shock of Paul's death and of all the events that have gone with it, it is this knowledge that has destroyed her serenity and that leaves her standing, perplexed and undecided, by the edge of the lake. How long she stands there, whether she walks in and drowns herself or walks away, we do not know.

"Most novelists lose creative intensity when they have no point to make," John Bayley has written in an introduction to *War and Peace*; "they slide over, and edge away. When Tolstoy has no point to make his description gathers wings." Chabrol is like most novelists, not like Tolstoy. He is very far from such film-makers as, say, the Forman of *Loves of a Blonde*, who lovingly explore the texture of life for its own sake. When in his other films, even the better ones, Chabrol does bring in material outside his structure, purely for our observation, it is liable to consist of crude caricature (for example, in *La Femme infidèle*, the characters of the secretary, the crazy guy in the café, and the drunken wife at the nightclub—although some of these are very amusing).

In *Le Boucher* there is virtually no extraneous material, nothing that is there simply for the sake of observation, that does not make a point. Indeed *Le Boucher* is characterized by that functional style in which nothing is wasted: every scene, every shot, advances the story (I am using story here in its broadest sense, to include characters, themes and feelings), and

every shot is composed to show us exactly what we need to see. But this does not mean that the film is in any way mechanical, sketchy, or superficial in its representation of the life it does show. On the contrary, most of the film has an extraordinary richness of behavioral nuance and detail, with its accompanying implication, expressing itself in facial expressions, vocal inflections, postures: the way Paul walks a few feet behind Hélène as they leave her building; the delicacy with which the two converse at the picnic; the longing with which he looks at her from a distance in the dance sequence; the mixture of fear, distress, control, and tact in Hélène's reactions to Paul during his second visit; and so on. The film lives. This is due, as much as anything, to the beautiful, sensitive acting of the two principals: Stéphane Audran, Chabrol's wife, who has appeared in most of his films and has grown with him to give her finest performance in her deepest role; Jean Yanne, no less good, in a sensitive, sympathetic role quite different, paradoxically, from the brutish, repugnant characters he has played earlier (the male lead in Godard's *Weekend* and Paul in Chabrol's previous film, *Que la bête meure*).

Chabrol's tight, intricate design is more than a beautiful way of advancing, linearly, the events of the story; it is also an organic structure in which character, event, dialogue, image, and environment all contribute to a single whole. Location, for example, is integral. Hélène's apartment, situated above the classroom and which we repeatedly see her ascend to and descend from by means of a steep circular staircase, is a kind of tower, a superior retreat from which she gazes down at the village and the life below. Paul pays her three visits. The first two times, he comes up to the apartment to be with her—among the rare times, one assumes, that she has allowed the seclusion of her fortress to be breached. The third time, when she is afraid of him, she runs down to shut him out; but he gets in anyway, to the classroom, and it is down there that she is confronted with his shame and suffering—and with his suicide. In a more schematic and artificial way, the caves—where Hélène takes the children and whose walls are covered

with the drawings of Cro-Magnon man—are meant to suggest the primitive impulses which are part of civilized man's heritage.

One way the elements of the film work is in developing two basic themes—marriage and death—and a special relationship between them. The film is structured so that marriage, and things associated with marriage, form an almost continual background to Hélène and Paul's relationship. The children of Hélène's class serve first for her, and then for her and Paul together, as a kind of surrogate offspring; and Chabrol is particularly skillful in having them continually run through the film—sometimes central to the action, sometimes peripheral to it—but always in a way that is organic and unforced. All this accentuates our perception of Hélène and Paul as two unmarried people moving in a framework where marriage is fundamental, and emphasizes along with it the possibility, always held out but never realized, of a marriage between them. At the same time there is a continual background of death, both in the murders occurring in the village and in the war deaths of Paul's recollections and conversation.

The most luminous way these two themes are represented, and fused, is in the two ceremonies: the wedding and the funeral. At the beginning of the film the church bells ring, introducing the first sequence: the wedding of Léon Hamel and his bride. This wedding ceremony is not only our introduction to the world of the film, to the village and its inhabitants: it is also Hélène and Paul's introduction to each other. The church bells ring again for one other ceremony: the funeral of Léon's beloved wife, the bride of the first ceremony and the second young woman Paul has murdered; and Paul and Hélène are at the funeral. If Léon and his wife are joined in marriage and separated by her death, the relationship of Hélène and Paul is such that, in the romantic tradition, they come closest to being married in death—in his death in this case. It is only in dying that he can confess his love for her, and that she can accept it and kiss him for the first time.

The film has its flaws. There is a big flaw in the mystery: an implausible contradiction in the logic Paul uses (involving the two cigarette

lighters) to conclude that Hélène knows he is the murderer. There are one or two momentary imperfections in the acting. There is one moment (the arrival at the hospital) where Chabrol's lucid visual exposition abandons him. And I don't think that the slowing down of tempo during the drive to the hospital is successful. Although the style here is meant to be more subjective than in the rest of the film, the actual effect is to make it appear that Hélène is not trying to get Paul there in a hurry, an impression Chabrol almost certainly did not intend and which would not fit if he had intended it. But if these flaws, some of them quite subtle, are bothersome, it is because they are seen against the perfection of most of the film; and even the worst of them is not seriously damaging.

Le Boucher seems particularly remarkable when we consider the route Chabrol has taken to get to it. His early films (*Les Cousins*, *Les bonnes femmes*, *L'Oeil du malin*, etc.), while skilled and sometimes powerful, usually settled for easy, obvious points and ironies, and their treatment of their characters was superficial when it was not gross and contemptuous. Of *Les bonnes femmes* Chabrol said: "I wanted to make a film about stupid people that was very vulgar and deeply stupid," and not only this but also the other early films generally bear out this shallowly cynical intention. After a series of commercial failures, Chabrol spent a four-year period (1964–67) on films, mostly spy spoofs, aimed at commercial success. Only one film from this period was shown in the United States, and it received little attention. *Les Biches* (1968) was slick, empty, and absurd. As recently as early 1969, before *La Femme infidèle* opened here, the most probable estimate of Chabrol was as a film-maker whose films were shallow and false at best, whose best films were at least seven years behind him, and who would never do anything worthwhile again. *La Femme infidèle* was something new: it had a fineness, an evenness of tone and style, that no earlier film had had. But it was nevertheless an external, coldly satirical film, with shallow, uninteresting characters, or characters it made shallow and uninteresting by its neutral, unsympathetic treatment.

Le Boucher is a radical departure: the first of Chabrol's films to treat its characters with compassion, love, and understanding rather than with irony, contempt, or disgust. The human folly which before seemed no more than the oddities of this or that class or milieu now is seen as the human predicament itself; what before was material for melodrama, farce, and black humor is now material for tragedy. We can see that the obsessions of *Le Boucher* are in many ways those of the earlier films, but the treatment has changed. There are obvious points of comparison, for example, between Paul in *Le Boucher* and André, the motorcyclist of *Les bonnes femmes*, who is obsessed with women's necks—who charms women, then takes them into the woods, only to strangle them. But in *Les bonnes femmes*, this was a kind of sick joke. Chabrol was laughing—and asking us to laugh—at Jacqueline, who thinks André is the Mr. Right she has been dreaming of and who gets murdered by him; at all the shop girls for the banality of their lives and the stupidity of their aspirations, their stupidity in even having aspirations; and at André himself, who was no more than a grotesque. This is playing it safe, a way of dissociating oneself from one's obsessions because one is afraid of them. It is quite another thing to implicate oneself in one's obsessions: to try to feel what it's like to be a pathological murderer and to experience his sufferings and longings—or what it's like to care about such a person, to feel affection and gratitude toward him and at the same time fear and horror of him.

For Chabrol, *Le Boucher* is a prodigious leap to a new plane of artistic consciousness. It allows us to look back on the earlier films—failures and shallow successes, artistic and commercial efforts alike—as learning and preparation for this, his first serious, honest film. But it is more than that. By the grace and understanding with which it represents fundamental aspects of human experience, by its power to resonate and to disturb us, to make us feel and reflect upon what it has shown us, it stands among the rare masterpieces of the film medium.

—PAUL WARSHOW

FRENZY

Producer-Director: Alfred Hitchcock. Script: Anthony Shaffer. Photography: Gill Taylor. Music: Ron Goodwin.

In the past decade, the most serious charge against the work of Alfred Hitchcock has been that of *dullness*, that absence of suspense in the simplest cinematic translation, that lack of surprise and malevolent wit that characterized the unforgettable twists of terror in *Psycho*. If Hitchcock's temporary "decline" in the genre of suspense films outraged his audiences, his followers never really deserted him; the spectators held on patiently throughout *The Birds*, praising its moments of excitement and ignoring the missed opportunities to make it something totally extraordinary. With *Marnie*, the lack of a strong feminine personality threw the entire film off-balance, one might say, and Sean Connery's Bondian image did not transfer its charm into a milieu hitherto reserved for such screen stalwarts as Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman. The problem of casting seemed to overwhelm the master as well as a propensity for hoping that the actors would vivify the sluggishness of such scripts as *The Torn Curtain* and the incredibly lifeless *Topaz*. The masterful cameo role of a pathetic expatriate, exquisitely played by Lila Kedrova, remains the shining episode in *Torn Curtain*, and the harrowing depiction of the awkward procedure of killing a human being by thrusting his head into a gas oven, or a suspenseful bus ride across hostile borders—these were almost lost because of the incongruous presence of Paul Newman and Julie Andrews. Hitchcock should always be aware that time is meaningless to his legion of admirers throughout the world and the Gaumont-British days are as alive as ever. There was an odd period in American cinema when it was felt that Newman's abilities could encompass the demeanor of Nobel prize-winners, in either literature or science, but alas, this was a misguided assumption. In the cinema of today, there are limits to the acceptance of fantasy, and one would trade a million glamor-stars for the Hitchcockian verisimilitudes of some contemporary Donats, Pilbeams, De Marnays, Ashcrofts and Lorres. It was extremely difficult to imagine Miss Andrews behind the